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Mixing It Up

Generic Complexity and Gender Ideology in Early Twenty-first Century Fairy Tale Films

Cristina Bacchilega and John Rieder

While folklorists often define the fairy tale or tale of magic as a narrative where the supernatural is never questioned—thus requiring the audience's absolute suspension of disbelief—recent fairy tale films seem to thrive precisely on raising questions about the realism, if not the reality, of fairy tales and their heroines. For instance, in the popular 1998 film *Ever After* (directed by Andy Tennant), the heroine's self-proclaimed great-great-granddaughter states, "While Cinderella and her prince did live happily ever after, the point, gentlemen, is that she lived." Bringing closure to the tale she has just told the two men identified as the Brothers Grimm, she reinforces this assertion by producing material evidence: not only a Leonardo portrait that is possibly of her Cinderella ancestor but another precious heirloom: the heroine's ornate and "real" glass shoe.

Charles Perrault's glass slippers lose their magic in that scene, but their material presence on screen adds to the realism that has inflected the noble-woman's telling of "Cinderella" not as a fairy tale but as family history, or, at the very least, legend. This Cinderella is a larger-than-life figure—not simply an ideal beauty but an active, educated, willful, *and* flawed woman—with whom the teller proudly associates herself, and one whom, presumably, girls at the end of the twentieth century will not dismiss as an outdated fantasy.

To reach adolescents, its target audience, this PG-13 film had to be "realistic," which meant not only using live action but also presenting more rounded characters than Disney's and not relying on the supernatural to produce the heroine's success. Rather, the film ascribed some degree of

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historical plausibility or legendary dimension to the Cinderella story by grounding its credibility in family history and its cultural significance in humanistic progress. Cathy Lynn Preston persuasively develops such a reading of *Ever After*. Placing her discussion in the broader popular-culture context of contemporary fairy tale jokes, TV shows, and folk criticism, she describes *Ever After* as an "American popular culture production of the Cinderella tale that cleverly blurs the boundaries between folktale and legend in an attempt to retrieve the romantic possibilities of 'true love' for the generation currently raised in the aftermath/afterglow of second-wave feminism and post-Marxist critique" (2004, 200). More specifically Preston suggests that the film's combination of "the shift in genre from fairy tale to legend" with "a shift in gender patterns" is a response to "the last thirty years of feminist critique of gender construction in respect to key Western European popularized versions of the fairy tale (in particular those of Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Disney)" (Ibid., 203).[1]

A lot has changed, we agree, in the production and reception of fairy tales in popular culture since the early 1970s, when North American feminists argued vehemently in the public sphere about the genre's role in shaping gender-specific attitudes about self, romance, marriage, family, and social power. Fairy tale studies has emerged as a field where sociohistorical-analysis challenges romanticized views of the genre. The electronic accessibility of a wide range of fairy tales (such as on D. L. Ashliman's *Folklinks: Folk and Fairy Tale sites* and Heidi Anne Heiner's SurLaLune fairytales.com) has expanded the popular canon far beyond the Perrault-Grimms-Disney triad. World-renowned writers such as Margaret Atwood, A. S. Byatt, Angela Carter, Robert Coover, and Salman Rushdie—recently christened "the Angela Carter generation" by Stephen Benson—have engaged the genre "intimately and variously," producing "what might be called the contemporaneity of the fairy tale" (Benson 2008, 2). Simultaneously a more critical awareness of the fairy tale has taken hold in popular consciousness. In twenty-first-century North America, the authority of the genre and its gender representations has become more multivocal, as Preston reminds

1 Christy Williams explores *Ever After* in this volume. Two other essays discuss the economy of genres in *Ever After* and raise questions of cultural value. John Stephens and Robyn McCallum (2002) focus on the hybridization of fairy tale and utopia in the film; their argument pits postmodern ideology and poetics against a feminist humanism, reinforcing a polarity that does not necessarily characterize fairy tale intertextuality today. Elisabeth Rose Gruner (2003) analyzes the way the dynamics of history and fairy tale in the film deauthorize a male-dominated tradition.

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us: "For many people the accumulated web of feminist critique (created through academic discourse, folk performance, and popular media) . . . function[s] as an emergent and authoritative—though fragmented and still under negotiation—multi-vocality that cumulatively is competitive with the surface monovocality" of the canonized older fairy tale tradition (2004, 199). Contemporary fairy tales, in both mainstream and eccentric texts, play out a multiplicity of "position takings" (Bourdieu 1985) that do not polarize ideological differences as they did during the 1970s but, rather, produce complex alignments and alliances.

To extend this point—as Cristina Bacchilega has already proposed—it may be helpful to think of the fairy tale genre today as a web whose hypertextual links do not refer back to one authority or central tradition. This early-twenty-first-century "fairy tale web" has woven into it—inside and outside of the academy—multiple, competing historical traditions and performances of the genre as well as varied contemporary revisions in multiple media (see Bacchilega 2008, 193–96).[2] And contributing to this proliferation of the contemporary fairy tale is its hypercommodification in popular film and the marketplace, including clothing, toys, video games, and more—a diversification that also has implications for the way folklorists and/or cultural critics read popular culture's employment of the fairy tale as an "already multilayered polyphony" (Makinen 2008, 151).

In approaching this new or transformed pervasiveness of fairy tale magic in American media today, Jeana Jorgensen builds on Linda Dégh's analysis of fairy tales in advertising (1994) and Preston's observation that "in postmodernity the stuff of fairy tales exists as fragments" acquired through a number of possible forms of cultural production (2004, 210) to tackle a crucial question: how to deal with films and other popular culture texts that "make money on fairy tales while critiquing them" (Jorgensen 2007, 219) and engage the fairy tale but "cannot be reduced to individual fairy tale plots" (Ibid., 218). "These fragments," Jorgensen declares, "whether fairy tale motifs, characters, or plots, are the building blocks of new media texts, inspired by fairy tales but not quite fairy tales themselves." She calls them "fairy tale pastiches . . . to privilege their 'schizophrenic instrumentalization

2 Donald Haase's "Hypertextual Gutenberg" (2006) pioneered the discussion of hypertextuality in fairy tale studies in ways that connect technological innovations with the dynamics of authority. Both Haase and Preston employ the metaphor of the web, and Bacchilega's conceptualization of the contemporary "fairy tale web" draws on their insights.

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of fairy tale matter'" (Ibid.).[3] Indeed, for every fairy tale movie that recycles a recognizable tale or tale type ("Cinderella," ATU 510 to folklorists, in *Ever After*; ATU 709 in *Snow White: A Tale of Terror* [directed by Michael Cohn, 1997]), there are other films that—regardless of their classification as comedy, drama, or fantasy—incorporate fairy tale elements drawn from a range of canonical images and themes, such as the young girl's red hoodie reminding viewers of "Little Red Riding Hood" (ATU 333) in *Hard Candy* (directed by David Slade, 2005), the magic slipper and happy ending in *Sex and the City* (directed by Michael Patrick King, 2008), or the animal helpers in the various *Harry Potter* movies (directed by Chris Columbus, 2001, 2002; Alfonso Cuarón, 2004; Mike Newell, 2005; David Yates, 2007, 2009)[4] and *The Golden Compass* (directed by Chris Weitz, 2007). Like Jorgensen, we are interested in this fragmentation of individual tales in relation to social power dynamics, but the emphasis in this essay is less on mixed tale types than the strategy and effects of blending fairy tale elements with other narrative genres.

In this chapter we reflect on some recent, popular, big-budget films that feature fairy tale elements as a major part of their appeal but do not rely on a single fairy tale plot. Recognizing both the fragmentation of the fairy tale—visible in the current configuration of the fairy tale web—and the central role that not just individual tales but some notion of the generic fairy tale continues to play in the encoding and decoding of popular culture, this essay focuses on these films' incorporation and integration of fairy tale elements with other narrative strands—that is, on the films' generic complexity or hybridization.

We do not mean to contrast the generic hybridity of these films with some "pure" version of the fairy tale. All literary or cinematic fairy tales—and indeed almost all narratives longer than a headline or a joke—use more than one genre. At the center of our analysis are relationships of tension or harmony—the clashing or blending of different genres in a text. In classic films, the fairy tale blends into and integrates itself with other film genres. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (directed by David Hand, 1937), the fairy tale and the musical are not in tension but, rather, flow naturally and

3 Whether the term *fairy tale pastiche* stays in the critical vocabulary of fairy tale and folklore studies or not, Jorgensen's essay opens up new possibilities for discussing the dynamics of social power within these popular culture texts, their relationship to literary and oral tales, and the uses that we as scholars make of our disciplinary authority.

4 See Ming-Hsun Lin's essay in this collection discussing the *Harry Potter* films.

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harmoniously into one another; their shared distance from realism seems complementary. In *The Wizard of Oz* (directed by Victor Fleming, 1939), the transitions between the realistic Kansas sections of the film and the magic world of Oz are carefully mediated in a way that allows everything in the fantasy section to be explained in realistic terms (that is, as Dorothy's feverish dream).

Some recent films, though, make a point of pushing the hybridity or generic complexity of their narratives into the foreground. Disney's *Enchanted* (directed by Kevin Lima, 2007)[5] creates a passage between a fairy tale world and a realistic one and exploits the two worlds' differences to comic effect as a kind of metacommentary on the suppression of realism in earlier Disney productions of fairy tale films. Other films, like Jim Henson Productions' *MirrorMask* (directed by Dave McKean, 2005) or Studio Ghibli's *Spirited Away* (directed by Hayao Miyazaki, 2001), seek a more homogeneous combination of what remains a strikingly noticeable and eclectic mix of generic strategies or traditions.

What concerns us is the social significance of the generic hybridity in a range of films, including *Enchanted, MirrorMask, Spirited Away,* DreamWorks's *Shrek* trilogy (directed by Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jenson, 2001; Andrew Adamson, Kelly Asbury, and Conrad Vernon, 2004; Chris Miller and Raman Hui, 2007), and Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006),[6] and, especially, the meaning of this approach as an intervention in the contestation or reproduction of gender ideology. If—in John Frow's words—"Texts—even the simplest and most formulaic—do not 'belong' to genres but are, rather, uses of them . . . [so that] they refer not to 'a' genre but to a field or economy of genres, and their complexity derives from the complexity of that relation" (2005, 2), how and why has the place of the fairy tale changed in the field of genres? What do those changes have to do with the genre's long and vexed connection to gender ideology?[7] To understand the relationship of the economy of genres to the ideologies of gender, what other fields and economies need to be considered? And because these different types of genre bending affect the reproduction of gender norms

5 Linda Pershing and Lisa Gablehouse critique *Enchanted* in this volume.

6 Tracie D. Lukasiewicz also analyzes *Pan's Labyrinth* in this collection.

7 In this anthology, essays by Kim Snowden, Christy Williams, and Ming-Hsun Lin in particular explore issues of gender.

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and attitudes, what positions are the films staking out within the culture and the industry of entertainment?

Parody and Romance in *Enchanted* and *Shrek*

One of the most prominent types of genre mixing in recent fairy tale films is the parodic practice of undercutting fairy tale conventions by contrasting them humorously with realistic ones. The Disney Corporation's *Enchanted* begins with a scene that evokes the "my prince will come" expectations of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Sleeping Beauty* (directed by Clyde Geronimi, 1959), but then the fairy tale princess, Giselle (Amy Adams), finds herself unexpectedly exiled from the two-dimensional animated world and forced to survive as an exaggeratedly naïve woman in the unfriendly confusion of New York City. The relationship between the cartoon Disney fantasy and the realistic New York setting is apparently one of stark oppositions—pastels decorating the heroine's idyllic relationship with nature and the fulfillment of romance in one space and genre versus grays cementing regular New Yorkers' routine dealings with vermin, dirt, and work in the other. As each of the fairy tale characters emerges into New York from the enchanted world of Andalasia, his or her arrival occasions a traumatic experience. The city takes the place of the unfamiliar forest where classic fairy tale heroines and heroes used to be tested, but at first what is tried is not the characters' mettle so much as their sense of genre. Giselle mistakes a thief for a helper, her prince (James Marsden) mistakes public-utility workers for peasants, and both show an alarming propensity to launch into song during the middle of a conversation. The climax of this incongruity comes in Giselle's musical housecleaning number in New York, a grotesque parody of the similar song in *Snow White* that has already been more subtly parodied in the film's cartoon section.

Underlying this clash of genres, however, is an economy that reunites them. *Enchanted*'s parodic strategy eventually yields to a return to Disney's familiar fairy tale expectations, even though Giselle changes from a Sleeping Beauty/Snow White innocent persecuted heroine to the rescuer of her "true love" in a "dragon-slaying" scene at the top of the Empire State Building. This mélange of Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*, *King Kong* (directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, 1933), and *Shrek* hinges on a role reversal that is hardly transformative. That the dragon is female recalls the lady dragon in *Shrek,* and in a way minimizes the irrationality of the kidnapping

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of Robert (Patrick Dempsey), Giselle's New York love interest. That the monstrous dragon is only the final metamorphosis of the monstrously powerful, older, female Narissa (Susan Sarandon), the queen who does not want to relinquish her power to her son, Prince Edward, prompts us to ask who or what is a King Kong threat nowadays. Finally, although Giselle risks her life to save Robert, it's the sidekick chipmunk, Pip, who saves the day in the climax of the film's rehabilitation of city vermin as animal helpers.

So we can't even say that Giselle performs the heroic rescue expected of the Prince Charming stereotype. She is charming, and that's it. In this and all too many other ways, *Enchanted* merely pays lip service to feminism.[8] While becoming more three dimensional and making choices for herself, Giselle continues to be a cheerful and fashionable housecleaning helpmate, whose actions never question the institution of marriage. The film parodies Disney's earlier representations of Snow White and Sleeping Beauty—the princesses who sing but have nothing to say, who engage in cheerful housework and exhibit fashions on hourglass figures, who know their prince will come—but it ultimately seeks only to bring new glamour and power to the Disneyfied fairy tale princess image and her romantic plot.

Furthermore, the film's congruity with the Disneyfication of the fairy tale harnesses its gender ideology to the marketplace. *Enchanted* blatantly advertises Disney's "princess" franchise, a multi-billion-dollar business that sells toys, DVDs, dolls, and clothes for girls and women. In the transporting song-and-dance scene in Central Park, the commodification of the fairy tale as an escapist or compensatory fiction is naturalized or, more precisely, spectacularized. Early in the film, New Yorkers scoff at the "ever ever after," but in this scene, they (as representatives of *Enchanted*'s mainstream Euro-North American audiences) love pretending they are in its make-believe world, whether this means dressing up for an exclusive and expensive costume ball, dressing up and paying for a fairy tale wedding, or flocking to a children's performance of "Rapunzel" (ATU 310), featuring a young girl with fake long tresses spilling out of a miniature tower in the park—another teaser for an upcoming Disney computer-animated production.

It is no wonder that Giselle's song and charm seduce the New York lawyer who is her skeptical prince figure as well as *all* the park-goers. The ball, the wedding, and the other make-believe scenarios naturalize the appeal

8 Pauline Greenhill and Anne Brydon, Sidney Eve Matrix, Linda Pershing and Lisa Gablehouse, Kim Snowden, and Christy Williams discuss feminism and feminist perspectives on fairy tale film in this volume.

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of fantasy and display the power of magic for sale in the contemporary world. There is no parody here but a *Fantasia*-like (directed by James Algar, Samuel Armstrong. Ford Beebe, Norman Ferguson, Jim Handley, T. Hee, Wilfred Jackson, Hamilton Luske, Bill Roberts, Paul Satterfield, and Ben Sharpsteen, 1940) spectacle of commercialized dreams for which girls and women dress up. The film's insistent clash of worlds and genres merely consolidates a normative project that exploitatively sells a watered-down representation of feminism to the same ends as Preston sees in *Ever After*: to "retrieve the romantic possibilities of 'true love' for the generation currently raised in the aftermath/afterglow of second-wave feminism and post-Marxist critique" (2004, 200).

DreamWorks produced *Shrek* and its sequels starting in 2001 in an effort to contest Disney's corporate monopoly (Zipes 2006a, 211). This struggle for power among producers of today's fairy tale films is actually dramatized as a *mise-en-abîme* from the competitor's perspective in one of *Shrek*'s early scenes, when we see unruly fairy tale or fantasy characters like Pinocchio, the ogre, the damsel in distress, and the talking donkey fighting to free themselves from the normalizing and self-aggrandizing project of one ruler's fantasy. And the commercial success of the *Shrek* films has indeed challenged Disney enough for it to produce *Enchanted* to regain its shaken monopoly on the cinematic fairy tale. But the parodic strategies that Disney and DreamWorks employ in comically mixing genre conventions, then utilizing them to bolster a specific social use of the fairy tale as genre, are not that different.

Like *Enchanted*, the *Shrek* films start by comically disrupting what is commonly understood as a classic—meaning clichéd, rather than traditional, in folklore terms—fairy tale frame. Each of the first three *Shrek* films begins with the same stereotypical scenario as its pretext and framing device: the rescue of the maiden in the tower, or the damsel-in-distress motif that a romanticized and Disneyfied image of the fairy tale has canonized. But in each film, the rescue explodes into parody. In the opening of the first film, the prince's rescue of the maiden, and the "true love" kiss that follows—presented in a beautifully illustrated children's book that someone is reading out loud—is interrupted by the reader's expression of disbelief, which sets the tone for the film's retelling. The ogre Shrek is then revealed as the reader. He tears the pages out—and since he is in the outhouse, we are left to imagine the rest.

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In the second film, when we are presented with the same storybook scenario, the happy ending is no longer there: Prince Charming arrives too late, finds a transvestite wolf in the princess's place, and realizes that Princess Fiona does prefer Shrek to him. In the third film, the prince's rescue is revealed as a cheap fiction, a role that he plays on a tacky dinner-theater stage for a living. And yet, although the narcissism of the Disney-like prince is emphasized in all three films, the inadequacy of the rescue as a resolution or happy ending does not result in demythologizing a romanticized image of fairy tales because the *Shrek* trilogy goes on to celebrate Shrek and Fiona's nevertheless "magical" romance. In short, while the parodied rescue scenes draw on a satirical demystification of fairy tale formulas and motifs already active in popular culture, the effect is merely humorous and transient because the alliance of fairy tale and romance still ends up shaping the stories' closure and emotional power. *Enchanted* seems to have learned from the *Shrek* films this dualistic strategy of initially parodying the idealization of romance in earlier fairy tale films only to conclude by celebrating the same set of conventions. The presence of the strategy in both franchises testifies to the impact of the feminist critique on the reception of fairy tale film, on the one hand, and to the underlying strength of the gender ideology that feminists have sought to contest, on the other.

Another thread of the contemporary fairy tale web that the *Shrek* films reweave is the skepticism that has prompted many a feminist fairy tale joke. Consider this incident in *Shrek the Third*. The princesses—all the usual suspects: Snow White, Rapunzel, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty—together with the queen save the day for the whole kingdom. They do so by showing their fighting skills and, in the case of the queen, by turning a certain thickheadedness (she has willfully forgotten that her king was once a frog!) into a strength when she bashes down the wall of the dungeon imprisoning them with a blow of her head. It is hard to say whether this caricature of feminist militancy is laughing at, or with, women who stand up against gender oppression. But perhaps at least some of the *Shrek* films' greater commercial success may result from their raising such a question—something that *Enchanted* never attempts.[9]

This pattern of parodying, then celebrating, enchantment in these films may finally be less about the fairy tale than the ideological power and

9 *Shrek* grossed $120,000,000 during its first weekend in 2001. *Enchanted* grossed approximately the same in four months.

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contradictions in romance. Each of these films exposes the tension between fantasy and realism in the conventions of popular, formulaic romance, which combines strongly repetitive plots, a highly predictable set of complications, and a nearly obligatory happy ending with a demand for full-bodied characters—or at least engaging and convincing ones. The parodies of fairy tale conventions in these films echo this contradiction between the demands of plot and characterization. In fact, the films' jokes distance the main characters from their fairy tale prototypes for their viewers in a way that resembles what Sigmund Freud calls the "bribe" that the joke teller offers the listener to allow utterance of hostile or obscene material (1960, 100). The parodies express a disavowal of belief in fairy tale fantasies that opens up the space for rehearsing those same fantasies; since the films have declared that they and their audiences do not take them seriously, they and their audiences can go ahead and repeat them. Thus, this parodic strategy may owe the success evident in its repetition to the way it conspiratorially establishes the tellers' and the listeners' agreement to indulge in the guilty pleasures of unreconstructed romantic fantasy.

Genres and Worlds in *Pan's Labyrinth*

To say that generic strategies involve an economy of genres means, first, that generic choices have values attached to them, and, second, that making those choices involves taking a position on other choices and values. For John Frow, the consequences of generic choice are related to one's sense of reality: "genres create effects of reality and truth which are central to the different ways the world is understood. . . . The semiotic frames within which genres are embedded implicate and specify layered ontological domains—implicate realities which genres form as a pre-given reference" (2005, 19). Frow playfully lists a few of our "generically projected worlds," including the tabloid-press world, the world of the picaresque novel, the world of the Petrarchan sonnet, the world of the curse, the world of the television sitcom, "and so on, as many worlds as there are genres" (Ibid., 86–87).

Like Frow, Mark Bould connects genre choice to world construction when he argues that the critical potential of fantasy lies in its clarifying the inevitability and inescapability of such constructions in contrast to the invisibility that cloaks the generic strategies that maintain our everyday sense of reality: "what sets fantasy apart from much mimetic art is a frankly self-referential consciousness . . . of the impossibility of 'real life'"

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(2002, 83). Angela Carter wrote that the fairy tale "positively parades its lack of verisimilitude" (1990, xi). But through the institutionalization of the fairy tale as children's literature, the critical potential Bould attributes to this parading of artifice has been, for the most part, carefully subordinated to didacticism. The fairy tale has to teach its child reader a lesson about the real adult world, and our enjoyment of the pleasures of fairy tale imagination has to be justified by its ultimate performance of duty. Because of that history, the relationship between a fairy tale world and a realist one always has something to do with relationships between children and adults.

The choice to contrast fairy tale and realist elements in telling a story or making a film, then, necessarily involves taking a position about make believe versus reality in relation to pleasure versus duty and childhood versus maturity. In *Enchanted,* these oppositions collapse into the all-encompassing embrace of consumer capitalism, and the adults are finally infantilized by their embrace of the happily-ever-after romance fantasy. Although the *Shrek* films successfully take arms against the Disney Corporation's dominance of the fairy tale film, they certainly do not equally contest the dominance of conventional romantic fantasy or didactic rhetoric. In both *Shrek* and *Enchanted,* the deliberate parodic contrast between fairy tale convention and realist representation is not sustained because the values attached to the films—the generic worlds that are called upon—are not really at odds with one another. The gestures of rebellion against patriarchal convention are only pretexts setting up its eventual triumphant celebration.

At the other end of the spectrum from these films in the way it constructs and sustains a contrast between fairy tale and realist worlds is Guillermo del Toro's R-rated *Pan's Labyrinth.* No recent film raises the stakes in the generic economy of the fairy tale higher. Its double plot sets the fairy tale narrative of the voice-over frame story and the young protagonist, Ofelia (Ivana Baquero), against the historical account in 1944 Spain that is the world shared by all the adult characters in the film. Both worlds are dangerous and brutal: one is not a fantasy escape from the harsh realities of the other. During the climactic confrontation in the depths of the labyrinth between Ofelia and her monstrous stepfather, the fascist Captain Vidal (Sergi López), the fact that he cannot see the magical faun (Doug Jones) to whom Ofelia is speaking never receives the straightforward explanation the viewer expects: that Vidal sees what is really there, and Ofelia is only imagining her fairy

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tale. Instead, the scene dramatizes the abyss that separates the two narrative worlds—their mutual incomprehensibility.[10]

Nonetheless, the worlds act upon one another. While Vidal's bullet kills Ofelia in the historical world, in the fairy tale world, it completes her choice to save her newborn brother—rather than sacrifice him, as the faun commanded her—that earns her return to her real, royal home. Thus, Ofelia's fairy tale world is not insulated from the adults' reality but remains an alternative to it. And Ofelia's belief in the magical world is surely no more delusional than Vidal's faith in his own favorite story, the saga of the honorable death of a soldier passed down to him by his father, which he pathetically expects the community he has tortured and terrorized to pass on to his son. Stories in this film have profound effects and tie together generations, but no hierarchy of genres sorts out the choices they contain.

Pan's Labyrinth features two strong female protagonists—Ofelia and Mercedes (Maribel Verdú), Vidal's head servant and secret supporter of the anti-Fascist rebels—but its debt to feminism has less to do with the critique of gender ideology than with that critique's acknowledgment of the fairy tale's power. Del Toro does not strip the fairy tale of its didacticism. Ofelia's story certainly has an ethical point, articulated by the faun when he praises her for her decision to disobey his command to sacrifice her brother. Rather, Del Toro separates the fairy tale's moral imperative from the condescension that so often attends the encryption of adult rules in fairy tale situations. The fears and anxieties so strongly depicted in a film like *The Wizard of Oz* are no longer insulated, not so much from the children who view it—remember how notoriously frightening that film has been to many a young child—as from the adults invited to pass off the Wicked Witch of the West (Margaret Hamilton) as mere make believe. *Pan's Labyrinth* allows no subordination and separation of its sometimes-nightmarish fairy tale from the nightmare of history.

Del Toro's achievement bears comparison to Angela Carter's treatment of fairy tale conventions and traditions in *The Bloody Chamber*, but these artists are tellingly different from one another. Instead of the rapprochement between fairy tale and gothic that Carter achieves through eroticism, Del Toro uses the techniques of cinematic horror, a genre he has praised in interviews as a form of "naïve surrealism" that confronts commercial culture's

10 The analyses of Jennifer Orme (2008) and Jack Zipes (2008) have been helpful to us in working out this reading of *Pan's Labyrinth.*

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pathological denial of darkness and death (*Pan's Labyrinth* Official Podcast). By calling horror cinema's surrealism naïve, Del Toro does not mean that it is for children but that, unlike the surrealist movement of the early twentieth century, it does not separate itself from popular culture through the ironic distance of an elite or avant-garde attitude. He claims that his predilection for depicting monsters participates in "no postmodern irony whatsoever." The strategy of merging fairy tale and horror, and then making them the emotional and thematic partners of historical realism, insists upon the intellectual seriousness of these forms of popular culture that have been trivialized in the past.

Here a second comparison to Carter suggests itself. While her prodigious erudition allowed her to retell well-known fairy tales by drawing on their less-well-known folkloric genealogies, Del Toro constructs a synthesis of cinematic and pictorial traditions, alluding with equal virtuosity to Arthur Rackham and Francisco Goya (see DVD director's commentary). For both Carter and Del Toro, the point is that these allusions not only place their work in relationship with the traditions they invoke but also reposition the genres they work with. The power of Carter's and del Toro's work can be measured by the way each of them actively challenges and changes the value of the fairy tale within the contemporary economy of genres.

Fairy Tale Genealogies and Coming of Age in *MirrorMask* and *Spirited Away*

What, then, about those who choose to tell a cinematic fairy tale neither in the adult fairy tale mode of Del Toro, nor in the self-parodying fashion of *Enchanted* or the *Shrek* films, but in a manner aimed at teens and children that maintains conventional boundaries between the worlds of magic and reality?[11] The stresses and opportunities that contemporary intertextuality offers turn out to be just as decisive.

Jim Henson Productions' *MirrorMask*, directed by Dave McKean and written by Neil Gaiman, met with mixed critical reception for what appears to be its excessive faith in a formulaic and schematic understanding of the fairy tale. The most common complaint about the film was that its cinematic achievement—impressive though it was—still was not enough to sustain the viewer's interest in its weak plot and thin characterizations. "The

11 Both *MirrorMask* and *Spirited Away* are rated PG.

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movie is a triumph of visual invention," wrote Roger Ebert, "but it gets mired in its artistry and finally becomes just a whole lot of great stuff to look at while the plot puts the heroine through a few basic moves over and over again" (2005).

The plot certainly follows a predictable set of conventions. A child protagonist (female in this case), faced with real-world problems she does not know how to deal with, enters a magic world where she meets a different set of challenges—a quest involving various magical tasks. When Helena (Stephanie Leonidas) completes the quest and reenters the real world, the audience understands that the magical experience has equipped her to work through the original problems, or at least discover the personal resources necessary to deal with them—in short to take a crucial step toward growing up and becoming an adult. In *MirrorMask,* the realistic development and rounding of characters in the initial situation is simply abandoned in favor of their visually stunning re-presentation in the fantastic world, where they appear as distorted doubles of their real selves, a doubling accentuated by an overriding moral dualism splitting them into good and evil halves.

The charge that fairy tale formula undermines the film's imaginative energy may, however, be countered by calling attention to its generic eclecticism. The fascinating dream world takes its striking stylistic vigor from the protagonist's drawings, which clearly provide the basis for much of its imagery and represent a psychological process of displaced autobiographical representation parallel to the story. (Gaiman's graphic novel version of *MirrorMask* is narrated entirely in the first person and through the protagonist's drawings.) The title of the film, which names the object of the protagonist's quest in the dream world, also refers to the complex function of the drawings. Acting both as reflecting surfaces and expressive windows between her inner and outer worlds, they both convey and hide the artist's feelings. They also dramatize her confusion about her proper role in her family and the way to deal with her developing sexuality. The drawings, in short, explore how what she sees in the mirror matches up with the masks she puts on.

The self-reflexive relationship of the drawings to the story-within-the-story parallels the self-conscious handling of text and interpretation within the dream. Books are not read but turn into magic vehicles when properly cajoled. The relationship between the dreamer's identity crisis and her family romance is not only elaborated in the elevated and polarized roles played by her mother as Queen of Light and Queen of Shadows (Gina McKee),

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her father as Prime Minister (Rob Brydon), and herself as Good Princess and Bad Princess but also through the film's playful allusions, not to the Oedipus myth but to its riddle. The main joke is that Helena counters the sphinx's well-known challenge by changing it into a neck riddle: one that usually functions in traditional tales, as it does in *MirrorMask,* to save the riddler's life but to which only one person—the riddler—can know the answer (Abrahams 1980, 8–9). It is not man who goes on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs at night, she declares, but rather the circus dog, which she saw running about normally in the morning, performing on two legs in the afternoon, and, for unknown reasons, limping on three in the evening.

Perhaps this substitution of an entirely personal solution for the Oedipal riddle's universal referent (with interpretations that can be sexualized or not) deflates generic expectation the same way that the insistence in *Ever After* about the historical reality of Cinderella does. The dreamer and the viewer know that the fairy tale sequence is not about good and bad queens and princesses but a particular talented teenage girl and her sick mother. The point, however, is not the framing realism of the narrative but its willing suspension in the center. The clever and funny way Helena befuddles the sphinx is also a joke about the dream—a dig at its adolescent self-involvement and a whimsical admission of how worn are the conventions that nonetheless get donned as provisional masks in the artist's private theater. The play with riddling reminds us, first, that formulas handicap those who put too much dull-witted faith in them—like *MirrorMask*'s comical sphinx but also like the New York girlfriend (Idina Menzel) in *Enchanted,* who decides true happiness lies in actually becoming the cartoon partner of her prince in Andalasia. Second, however, such play suggests that—like the library-books-cum-flying-carpets—these formulas can be transformed into serviceable vehicles for those who know how to tease them into life. The fun in this film depends as much on the allusions as the surprises, and no more heavily on the protagonist's uniqueness and depth than her typicality.

The status of types versus individuals is crucial to *MirrorMask*'s gender ideology and economy of values. Despite playing with the roles of princess and queen, *MirrorMask* enjoins its audience to make use of this typology, rather than consume or be consumed by it. Set to the tune of Burt Bacharach's "Close to You," the stylized dance scene, where clockwork dolls transform Helena into a fairy tale princess, is presented as dystopic in the film and the book—where the magic of dressing up is exposed visually as

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restrictive mask and aurally as hypnotic placebo: "I watched them as they took me, and they made me beautiful. It was like I was another girl, and I watched her clothes, her hair, her lips, as the dolls made her perfect. She was me, and yet she wasn't me at all. She wasn't angry. She didn't feel anything at all. . . . They had made me into the thing the Dark Queen wanted me to be—perfectly passive and, looking back on it, perfectly pathetic" (Gaiman 2005, n.p.). Helena never fully embraces the princess avatar—the ideal (obedient and controllable) child and the ideal (beautiful and controllable) woman—or the fetishistic costume that comes with it. And as soon as she can, Helena runs away from the enchanted palace.

The film thus distances itself quite unequivocally from the romance fantasy and attendant gender ideology of *Enchanted* and *Shrek:* its coming of age plot resolves in a back-to-work ending, rather than using happily-ever-after conventions. Tellingly, Helena's romantic interest is inspired by a helper and a trickster—a juggler, rather than a prince. Such plot and thematic decisions are also generic choices that position the film within a significantly different construction of the fairy tale's genealogy. In contrast to the way *Shrek* and *Enchanted* allude almost exclusively to the corpus of Hollywood fairy tale film, *MirrorMask* invokes a folklore tradition where stories solve the problems of a day, rather than plotting an ideal life. Helena performs the role of the smart and witty, if not wise, girl featured in folktales such as "The Clever Farmgirl" (ATU 875) and "Rescue by the Sister" (ATU 311). These girls make use of everyday experience or practical knowledge to answer riddles and pass tests posed by powerful men. And whether they marry or not, that is not the goal of their adventures (see Greenhill 2008).

It is to this idea of the fairy tale as a genre absorbed in "pleasure in the fantastic" and "curiosity about the real" (Warner 1994, xx) that Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* also connects. Like *MirrorMask,* this fairy tale film presents a girl's coming-of-age story that does not culminate in a wedding or have happily-ever-after closure. But in this case, Japanese *anime* (film) plays a role in generic expectations. The *shōjo*—literally "little female," functioning as "a shorthand for a certain kind of liminal identity between child and adult"—is pervasive in both *manga* (comics) and anime (Napier 2005, 148); and perhaps in reaction to American comic books and animated films, happy endings are not required in manga/anime (Kelts 2006, 34, 114).

Spirited Away shares with *MirrorMask* that typical fantasy structure whereby a girl's dreamlike or magic quest is framed by a realistic problem-posing plot. But successfully completing the quest hardly fixes everything:

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the worlds to which Helena and Chihiro return remain problem filled. Ten-year-old Chihiro goes from being an unpromising heroine to an "intrepid" one (Zipes 2006a, 211), a shōjo upon whose courage—but also discipline and integrity—the rescue of others—the dragon Haku, the XL baby Bôh, and her parents—depends. Like the children in "Hansel and Gretel" (ATU 327A), Chihiro must contend with greed and the danger of being cannibalized, but as critics have noted, the fairy tale elements in *Spirited Away* are commenting specifically on Japanese twenty-first-century reality and culture (Kelts 2006).

And yet to read *Spirited Away* as "an explicit critique of the consumerist lifestyle that created the shōjo phenomenon" in the first place (Napier 2005, 180) does not address the phenomenal success of this fairy tale film across national boundaries. This film's generic complexity has a multilayered transnational character. The fairy tale genre on which *Spirited Away* draws is grounded not only in a nonhomogeneous Euro-American tradition ("Hansel and Gretel" along with the cinematic *The Wizard of Oz* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*) but in Japanese folktales (Miyazaki's assertion in Reider 2005, 7). The fairy tale problem-solving plot combines with topoi of pollution and cannibalism found in older mythic and epic narratives from both the West (Proserpina's story as well as *The Odyssey*) and the East (the Japanese mythological story of Izanagi and Izanimi; Ibid., 5–6). Fairy tale fiction and real-world religion, especially Buddhist and Shinto beliefs, are also folded together (Anime and Popular Culture 2007). Here the fairy tale does not link up with the family legend, as in *Ever After,* but with a different kind of belief narrative that imbues specific places and natural forces with spiritual power.

If the mix of fairy tale magic and religious belief is not new (the Brothers Grimm tales are heavily laden with Christian values and dialogue), the reanimation of the connection between humans and nature that *Spirited Away* embodies has a peculiarly contemporary quality. Both moral and ecological, this message has at its center the reciprocal bond between Chihiro, the human girl tasked with saving herself, her parents, and others from greed and selfishness, and Haku, a boy who is also a captive white dragon that has forgotten he is a river god. In the English-language version of *Spirited Away,* this relationship is called "love," but it is not romance, and it lacks the sexual overtones of other anime. Rather, this connection energizes dynamics of care, respect, and responsibility that can be restorative, both for perceived social problems in Japan ("the increasing absence of the traditional family"

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[Napier 2005, 148]) and the sustainability of life across nations in the face of the horrendous impact of human greed and exploitation on this planet.

In Conclusion

This essay has focused on generic complexity or hybridity to emphasize the competing social uses of the fairy tale in contemporary Western popular culture. Because the films we have considered are based on fairy tale fragments and bypass the retelling of any single tale, they are seeking to participate in the aura of the fairy tale—exploiting, exploring, and renewing the power of the genre. They conceive of that power differently, and the way they use it establishes different relationships between the fairy tale and the "real world." To return to one of our guiding metaphors—the economy of genres—we have tried to understand how choosing to use fairy tale elements invests in the genre: taking a position with respect to the values it entails and the stakes it raises. We have suggested, then, that these films' generic hybridity is symptomatic of the feminist destabilization of the gender ideology historically invested in the genre, with each film mobilizing generic alliances that seek to extend or contain the unsettling of the gender ideology in Disney-dominated fairy tale film.

The films also all intervene in the fairy tale's representational and rhetorical relationship to childhood, and collectively they chronicle a cultural struggle to control the power of the fairy tale to speak to and about the privileges and indulgences granted to childhood as well as the duties and responsibilities expected from maturity. While inevitably participating in the commodification of the fairy tale, each of these films furthers or contests the increasingly common practice of the genre to peddle its franchise byproducts by inculcating the desire to possess their "magic." Finally, the varied dynamics of these films' generic strategies depends upon the historical and cross-cultural hybridity of the fairy tale. "There was never such a thing as a 'pure' folktale or a 'pure' fairy tale" (Zipes 2001, 868–69), and the genre's competing genealogies are very much at work in the narrative and rhetorical construction of fairy tale enchantment in contemporary film.

Drawing on theories of Creole linguistics and his fieldwork in Indian Ocean islands, folklorist Lee Haring writes that hybridization of folktales and fairy tales "most often occurs when cultures converge and clash. Narratives are deterritorialized, decontextualized, combined with other narratives, and recontextualized in different settings and places" (2008, 466).

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Such recombining and recontextualizing in recent fairy tale films impacts not just individual narratives but the genre itself. Contemporary hybridization of the fairy tale film reveals a clash of values—a struggle over gender construction and a fight to control the energies of fairy tale wonder—that is far from played out.

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